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SUBJECT: PARTIES VIE FOR LABOR SUPPORT

¶1. (U) Political turnout was impressive at the Japanese Trade Union Confederation's (JTUC-Rengo) annual new year's party January 7. Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) leader Ichiro Ozawa both attended and addressed hundreds of guests, as did Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare Yoichi Masuzoe, Acting DPJ President Naoto Kan, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Secretary General Bunmei Ibuki, New Komeito leader Akihito Ota, Social Democratic Party President Mizuho Fukushima, and People's New Party Secretary General Hisaoki Kamei.

¶2. (SBU) Interlaced with standard new year's greetings, barbed remarks flew as politicians got up, one by one, to speak to assembled labor and business leaders, Diet members, and the media. After Minister Masuzoe stressed his determination to address the problems in the pension system, DPJ Acting President Kan criticized the LDP's efforts, only to hear LDP Secretary General Ibuki compare the DPJ's policy pledges to catalog shopping -- implying that what one is shown is not always what arrives in the mail. Nearly every speaker promised to improve work-life balance while framing the challenges Japan faces with hot-button references to people's economic worries, including the uncertainties of the U.S. subprime loan situation and Japan's widening gap between rich and poor.

¶3. (SBU) PM Fukuda's remarks were self-deprecating and acknowledged the battering he has taken over the pension system issue, but they contained a clear message. The labor movement is not enemy territory, he said, and he expressed his strong desire to work with the DPJ and other parties to accomplish "good things."

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Rengo is a traditional stronghold for the DPJ, but with an election expected in 2008, all the parties are courting labor.
DONOVAN